

SOCIAL IDENTITY OF YEMENI STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN MALAYSIA: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY PERSPECTIVES'

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Abstract

This paper highlights the social identity negotiation of Yemeni post graduate students in Malaysian based on Tajfel and Turner social identity theory. One of the reasons that drive Yemenis to Malaysia to further their studies is due to social and religious closeness. Whether Yemenis really benefit from cultural and religious remain unknown because, the issue Yemeni students social and cultural experiences in Malaysia remains underrepresented. Thus, this study aims to explore Yemeni students and their social integration into the Malaysian society. The study was conducted in four public Malaysian universities namely, using qualitative methods approach. There were 30 interviewers for this study which took one-year time and 20 Yemenis post graduate students participated. The study revealed three salient identities among Yemenis in Malaysia which are: clear identity, ambivalent identity and transit identity. The findings show that some of these students appeared to be inclined to their own Yemeni identity, while some of them were inclined to Muslim identity. And few students seem to have transit identity. Further, the study reveals few examples of successful Yemen integration into the Malay community.

Keywords: Yemeni students, ambivalent identity, transit identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

International students and sojourners in a new culture often find themselves in a new environment involving people from diverse cultures. Thus, new comers' religious identity's influence on their intercultural communication with the host society is crucial. However, it has been a neglected topic in the intercultural communication literature which tends to focus more on effects of acculturation on academic base (Berry & Kim, 1988) and (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Religious identity is important for creating good rapport among international students and the host society especially those confessing the same religion. Thus, it facilitates communication and boosts more effective intercultural communication.

In the other hand, international students engage in multidimensional endeavor when they are studying abroad, they are faced with various cultural issues that are influenced by the host country cultural similarities and differences. Hence, the wellbeing of international students has become crucial for host countries because these students can speed the wheel of economy and enhance the purchasing power of the hosted nation as well as lifting universities international rankings (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010). Besides that, international students would also contribute to the cultural developments of hosted nations such as religious harmony and tolerance.

In recent years, some Asian and Middle Eastern countries have begun to attract more international students. When entering in the market, these countries have declared their goals to become global education centres that enrol as many thousands of international students to their countries (OECD, 2011). Adekalu and Oludeyi (2013) noted that large number of international students especially from the middle east chose Malaysia to further their studies in institutions where they can be exposed to multicultural, standardized and quality academic experience. Consequently, it becomes easier for them to willingly to contribute meaningfully to the development of both host institution and nation.

It appears, however, that students from Asian and Indian regions are drawn to wealthier western countries such as USA and UK in the northern hemisphere and Australia in the south (Wiley & Sons, 2008). This is particularly so with respect to USA. The realities are that other factors such as financial constraints may dictate a destination that is not students' first choice (Tapper, & Macdonald, 1974). The main destinations preferred by international students are: United States (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and Australia (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The following provides some figures of international students in: USA and UK; Germany and France; and Malaysia, Singapore, and China.

Malaysia in particular, plus with Singapore and China are emerging destinations for international students. Reportedly, these countries make approximately %12 of the global students market with around 250,000 - 300,000 students having pursued their higher education studies in these countries in 2005 and 2006 (OECD, 2011). Obviously, it is not surprising why many Yemeni students are heading to Malaysia for study.

However, researches about Yemeni students in Malaysia have not been focusing on them deeply, thus, Yemeni students remain underrepresented. As most researches implicate them as part of international students in Malaysia. Consequently, it is hard to find certain research that investigates Yemen students in particular especially in the acculturation and intercultural communication fields. Therefore, it is important to go through some researches that include Yemeni students as part of international students and have a glimpse of International students in Malaysia in general.

The number of international students in Malaysia is growing healthily. The 2015 statistics indicate that there were 114,653 international students in Malaysia; from which 85,194 are Undergraduate level, and 29,459 are Post-graduate level. Notably, the Arab students counted for around 22,000, with Yemeni students represents the largest number among the Arab countries with around 6000 students (MOHE, 2015). This growth is in line with Malaysia's aspiration to become the hub of education in the region (Ding, Sallis, Kerr, Lee, & Rosenberg, 2011). In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia is reported to have announced that by 2020, MoHE aims for Malaysia to be the host for at least 200,000 international students (Rotman, Vieweg, Yardi, Chi, Preece, Shneiderman, & Glaisyer, 2011).

Henceforth, looking at the accumulating number, the Malaysia 2020 aim, which have been mentioned earlier in this chapter; can be realized. However, Malaysia is new at playing host to international students. This is evinced by the nature of literature circulating in Malaysia. Documents reporting studies involving international students include those on policy and trend (Sirat, 2018) and (Tham, & Kam, 2008); on the factors that influence their choice of university in Malaysia (Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim, & Saad, 2009), (Baharun, Awang, & Padlee, 2011), (Othman & Thani, 2010), (Abduh & Dahari, 2011), and (Alavi & Mansor, 2011); and on the international students' problems in general that include studies by (Al-Zubaidi, & Recharls, 2010), (Saad, Yunus, & Embi, 2013), (Awoke, & Mucche, 2013), and (Croucher, Zeng, Rahmani, & Sommier, 2017).

Clearly, it is difficult to locate any published scholarship dealing with how cultural identities guide Arab students in their intercultural communication experiences and how these experiences affect their identities. Hence, employing religious identity in the investigation is needed because religion is an essential layer of culture (Bnagura, 2004). Thus, any change in one identity can affect the other identity. Indeed, there is little research on Arabs in general in the Malaysia context Al-Zubaidi, 2010), and (Alghail, & Mahfoodh, 2015).

Historical, social, and societal characteristics of Arabs in Malaysia were examined in two studies by Hassan and Weiss (2012) and Shamsul (1997). These studies have investigated historical roots of Arabs in Malaysia, and described how Arabs assimilate into the Malaysian society which will be explained in the

literature review. The experiences of Arab students in academic contexts were the main focus of attention of studies by (Al-Khasawneh, & Maher, 2010) and (Abdulkareem & Mustafa, 2013). Al-Khasawneh, Saleh, and Maher, conducted their research at University Utara Malaysia (UUM) and found difficulties for Arab students in language and adaptation to Malaysian behaviours in daily activities like greeting, food practice and so on. Additionally, this study had some limitations, such as examining only ten postgraduate students who came from different Arab countries, investigating their first experiences in adjusting to the academic context, and restricting the research investigation to the academic context without including the social problems that these students faced in the Malaysian community. Abdulkareem and Mustafa concluded that Arab student in public universities found it hard to adapt to the academic settings in these universities because it is different to that of the academic settings in their countries. They also found that students often get miscommunication with their lecturers because of some gestures and body language which might be considered offensive in Malay culture, yet normal in the Arabian culture. In their conclusion they recommend for more culturally oriented researches to be done on Arab students.

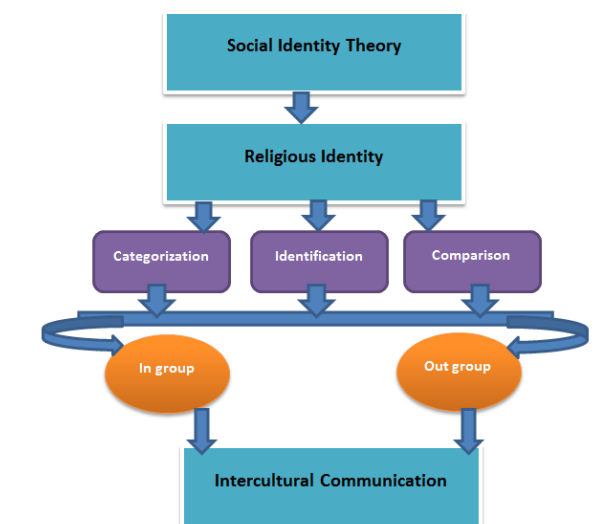
These limitations justify the need for conducting this far more detailed study because there is no studies investigate the experiences of Arab students in **negotiating their cultural identities particularly religious identity**. Due to the uniqueness of Malaysia compared to other international students' host countries, especially after the events of terror attacks, impacts of Arab spring, and other tragic events in Western countries which resulted in tough experience for Arabs and Muslims in the West. Most of these terror incidents were blamed on Muslims particularly Arabs. Subsequently, incidents of racism, suspicion, abuse, threats, violence, religious discrimination and social exclusion against Arabs and Muslims have increased in both Western social and academic contexts (Singh, 2016). Hence, it has become hard for Arab students to have easy access to western countries or experiencing difficulties for those who already studying the west.

Nevertheless, Malaysia's openness and acceptance of cultural diversity and other cultural background in general, and towards Muslims in particular (Collier, & Hoeffler, 1998) would enable the process of the cultural negotiation for Arab students, as negotiation is based on relationships and interactions (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Therefore, this research attempts to explore the development and negotiation of religious identity and whether that leads to in-group or out-group identities, and how that contributes to their intercultural communication literacy. Most previous studies focused on how students interact with people in campuses but not within the larger community. It is important to take these two approaches into consideration because people negotiate their identity through their interaction with both people and institutions. Henceforth, this research will employ social identity theory to investigate how Yemeni students negotiate their religious identities and how they balance their cultural differences through their interactions with Malaysian.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To investigate how Yemeni students negotiate their social identity based on the process of categorization, identification and comparison.
- To explain how social experiences of Yemeni students in Malaysia affect their intercultural communication with Malaysian.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



4. OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORIES

Scholars have come up with different perspectives on studying identity. A communication perspective emphasizes that the self does not create identities alone; instead, they are co-created through communication with others (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). In other words, identities emerge when messages are exchanged between persons. Abrams (2003) emphasizes that identity and communication are mutually reinforcing. By communication, they mean not only language, but actions, rules, behavior, discrimination and labels. Furthermore, they consider how communication is manifested and changed when individuals hold positive, moderate and negative social identities.

Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups (e.g. social class, religious group, family, football team etc.) which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. In order to increase our self-image we enhance the status of the group to which we belong. Due to that for instance; some Arabs believe they are more Islamic and religious than other Muslims. We can also increase our self-image by discriminating and holding prejudice views against the out group (the group we don't belong to); for example, the Non-Arabs don't have good interpretation of Islam.

Therefore, they divided the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization (i.e. they put people into social groups). This is known as in-group (them) and out-group (others). Social identity theory states that the in-group will discriminate against the out-group to enhance their self-image.

Henri Tajfel proposed that stereotyping (i.e. putting people into groups and categories) is based on a normal cognitive process: the tendency to group things together. In doing so we tend to exaggerate:

1. The differences between groups
2. The similarities of things in the same group.

Similarities between the actor and other individuals in the social situation define the in-group, while differences between the actor and other individuals are defined as the out-groups. Meanings that are applied to the out-groups (whether accurate or not) are stereotypes. They categorize people in the same way. They see the group to which we belong (the in-group) as being different from the others (the out-group), and members of the same group as being more similar than they are. Social categorization is one explanation for prejudice attitudes (i.e. "them" and "us" mentality) which leads to in-groups and out-groups. Tajfel and Turner proposed that there are three mental processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them" (i.e. "in-group" and "out-group"). These take place in a particular order. The first is **categorization**. People categorize objects in order to understand them and identify them. In a very similar way, they categorize people (including themselves) in order to understand the social environment. They use social categories like black, white, Australian, Christian, Muslim, student, and bus driver because they are useful. Thus, the question is how Yemeni students categorize their own religious identity and Muslim identity in Malaysia.

If they can assign people to a category then that tells them things about those people, and, they couldn't function in a normal manner without using these categories. Similarly, they find out things about themselves by knowing what categories they belong to. They define appropriate behaviour by reference to the norms of groups they belong to, but you can only do this if you can tell who belongs to your group. An individual can belong to many different groups.

In the second stage, **social identification**, they adopt the identity of the group they have categorized themselves as belonging to. If for example you have categorized yourself as a student, the chances are you will adopt the identity of a student and begin to act in the ways you believe students act (and conform to the norms of the group). There will be an emotional significance to your identification with a group, and your self-esteem will become bound up with group membership. Consequently, it is important to understand what type of social identification Yemeni students in Malaysia identifies themselves as.

The final stage is **social comparison**. Once they have categorized themselves as part of a group and have identified with that group they then tend to compare that group with other groups. If their self-esteem is to be maintained their group needs to compare favourably with other groups. In this respect it is important to know how Yemeni students compare theirs with their Malaysian counterparts in the context of religious identity.

As for the Yemeni students, the hypothesis based on the concept of identity lays on individual's categorization, the question is when Yemeni students to Malaysia, they should begin classifying themselves either they are at first Yemenis and second Muslims or the opposite. As the religious ones might adapt being religious identity which considers Malays as similar to them, and that would result in an effective intercultural

communication. Second, once those students categorize themselves to which group either Muslim group, national group, gender group, student group and so on; they would try to identify their new group and start learning and adapting to its norms. Thirdly, after identifying themselves with particular group or groups, as an individual might belong to more than one group, they will start to compare they're in group with the out group, which might result in identity negotiation and an emergence of new identity. Yemenis might stick to their identity of origin but after frequent interactions with Malays; some might consider the religious closeness with the Malays after realising that the Malay religious culture suits them more than their original religious culture. Thus, Yemenis will positively benefit from such negotiation.

Consequently, the concept of identify is challenged as well by the fact that people can identify with a multitude of groups: gender, age, religion, nationality, to name a few. Not to mention multicultural people, a group that is currently dramatically increasing in number. Multicultural people are 'those who live on the borders of two or more cultures and often struggle to reconcile two very different sets of values, norms, worldviews, and lifestyles. In addition to multicultural identities based on race and ethnicity, there are multicultural identities based on religion, language, or other identities. Another group of people who experience multicultural identities are so called global nomads. These are people who grow up in many different cultural contexts because their parents moved around a lot (for example, missionaries, international business employees or military families). In any case, there is a close relationship between identities and social circumstances. Moreover, identities may change as society does (Gauntlett, 2008). Identities are ambiguous and this ambiguity is connected with a negotiable history and a negotiable cultural and religious context.

There are many characteristics that are related to religious identity, which some of them have been investigated in previous studies, however this research will mainly focus on four characteristics that are deemed more important to explore. These elements include life style, self- identification, sense of belonging and affirmation, and religious involvement in ritual practises.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Life Style

According to Molaiy, Moradkhani, & Ranjbarian, (2016) Lifestyle is relatively a new concept in modern societies following the emergence of individuality and the importance of selections of every day. The freedom of selecting lifestyle could influence many aspects of human life such as the people's acquiring identity.

Life style can be interpreted as a collection of behaviours that a person applies them to not only his needs be met but also to choose a certain direction to his own personal identity, so that they can be imagined against other (Boswell, Kahana, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2006). Lifestyle and religious identity have been explored in many studies, which yielded contradicted results. Nevertheless, lifestyle remains strong predictor of individual religious identity. As a person could be identified from the clothes he wears, the music he listens, the entertainment and hobbies he prefers.

A study examining lifestyle and its relation to religious identity of women in Iran, found that there is a relation between religiousness and the women's lifestyle. It concludes that the higher the rate of people's religiousness, the less they follow the modern life-styles. However, other researches have contradicted these findings, by attributing that strong religious identity contribute to stability of individuals, and acceptance for dynamic change; which implies lesser connection between religiosity and modern lifestyle (Weeden, Cohen, & Kenrick, 2008). As a result, these findings reinforce the importance of this research in exploring lifestyle of Yemeni students, as one the leading characteristics in shaping their religious identity.

Self-Identification

Religious identity prediction through Self-identification was found to be one of the strongest predictors of Muslim religious identity. Thus, the importance that one attaches to being religious in terms of how salient religious identity is among other identities and how likely individuals' base major life decisions on their religious faith is important in terms of Muslim religious identity development. In study about Muslim religious identity in USA, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) found there is negative connection between self-identification and religious identity. However, he suggested that future studies should focus on how self-identification relates to religious identity based on the degree of exploration of religion and commitment to a religion. Thus, the current study will explore how self-identification relates to Yemeni students' religious identity development or change.

Sense of Belonging and Affirmation

How close an individual feel toward his or her religious group and positive attitudes about one's own religious group are critical to the formation of a religious identity, so far, reflective outcomes found in the literature on Jewish identity and ethnic identity (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006) and (Tannenbaum, & Sharansky, 2009). As a result; those who are weak in their religious beliefs, negative

discourse of others may lead some to detach themselves from their religious group in order to avoid being categorized as member of this population. Not having a fit place within a religious community may lead to anxiety and sometimes resentment of the religious community. Particularly, Dudley and Laurent (1989) stressed that such isolation may result in one's separation quietly from his own religious group, or open hostility against one's religious group.

Religious Involvement in Ritual Practices

Although, Aziz found that there is no association between religious involvement in ritual practise and religious identity; it is considered to be insignificant in her study.

In the other hand, Bernheimer and Rippin, (2013) indicated that those who are active in religious organizations, regularly practiced their religion, and had a strong emphasis placed on religion while they were growing up, scored positive interaction with their fellow peers. They further stressed on the importance of religious involvement in ritual practises, henceforth, this research will attempt to explore this aspect in relation to Yemeni students in Malaysia; as this aspect is one of religious identity components this research aims to investigate.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted using qualitative method approach by conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviews involved 23 students from four Malaysian public universities namely UPM, IIUM, UKM, and UM, each university was represented by 6 students, except for UKM which was represented by 5 students, both respondents were chosen through snowball sampling. Data analysis for this study was by close reading and thematic analysis in which three typologies of identity surfaced and under each typology there were few themes.

7. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

As the finding in this study is being classified into typology of themes, which are Clear, Ambivalent, and Transit. The largest group of respondents fell in typology group one, suggesting that most of the Yemeni respondents had clear identities for the two types of identities. In other words, for each of these two identities – Yemeni and Muslim – a significant number of respondents felt more allegiance to either Yemeni or Muslim identities. The next largest group was ambivalent, suggesting that many of the respondents had identities that were either unambiguous or emergent. All two types of identity – Yemeni and Muslim - were visible across all typology groups, but Muslim were most significant, i.e. more positively chosen and favored.

In short, Interviews with selected Yemeni post graduate students have revealed that there are three major typologies of identities that are salient among the participants. Specific identity had been the most salient, which represents of two identities 'Muslim Identity', and 'Yemeni Identity'. Participants on this group were either emphasizing on their allegiance and prioritization for Muslim identity or Yemeni identity.

The second typology that emerged was the ambivalent identity, where respondents were hesitant and undecided among identities, as many factors influence the way they identify themselves such as acceptance reaction of others (Malaysians), push and pull Yemenis, who are at times express themselves as more Yemenis and vice versa. This group of participants were undecided and influenced by external and internal factors.

The third typology, which is smallest group of the respondents have shown that Malaysia is only transit station for them, they came for certain goal mostly education or professional enhancement. Thus, they think it is not necessary for them to try to integrate into the local community. They assume Malaysia as study destination only, and they prefer to keep away from being influenced by religious and social culture in Malaysia as that was not their purpose of residing in Malaysia.

There were a number of findings that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews:

Firstly: a major finding was the majority of Yemenis in Malaysia identify themselves as Muslims while they have strong attachment to the Yemeni religious identity, however few of them have negotiated their religious identity with the Malay religious identity.

Second: although researchers have argued that Yemenis would remain in their social group (Yemenis or Arabs), some Yemenis have been exposed to other social groups such as international students and Muslim and have become less attached to the Yemeni or Arab identity and in the opposite direction to what the existing academic literature suggests. However, very few of them who were found to abandon Yemeni identity and have become neutral.

Third: an understanding of socially and religiously based networks is paramount, serving as potential significant contributors in explaining Yemeni social disengagement. The findings suggest that less religious activity to have a negative impact on the belonging of Yemenis to Muslims in Malaysia. This can perhaps be explained by the findings from the interviews where Yemenis who are involved in more religious activities, were in fact more practicing in their religion, and also felt more Muslims which paved the way for them to socialize with Malays.

Fourth: the research finds Yemenis who have less Yemeni identification either in attire, food, or lifestyle, yet don't distance themselves from the Yemeni. Except for few individuals who felt attachment to Yemeni identity remind them of instability and civil war in Yemen.

Fifth: the research found that Yemenis have hold gratitude for being in Malaysia and experiencing its social and cultural landscape, which also promotes positive identification with the Malaysian mainstream. As opposed to previous studies which limit Yemenis to academic and this research confirms that some Yemenis were able to negotiate their identity and positively integrate into the Malaysian Muslims, although not many of them but such examples indicate the potential social integration among Yemenis in Malaysia. These have important implications for policy and for updating the claims and assumptions made in some previous academic research.

2. How do Yemeni students address their similarities and differences in their religious identity with Muslims in Malaysia and how that resulted creating the in group and out group mentality?

The study has revealed some behaviours among Yemeni students towards similarities and differences with Malays. These behaviours include less care regarding Malay social values, ignorance about some social and religious aspects, and maintaining Yemeni social and religious values. As a result, it seems these behaviours are preventing them from more penetration into Malay culture, thus keeping them away from discovering their similarities with Malays. Findings revealed many Yemenis have shown less interests in negotiating their differences with Malays, hence, most of their interaction and contact remain in their community group or at most with the international students. However, there are few who were able to penetrate the Malay society and have become familiar with Malay social and religious values. Thus, eliminating the assumption that suggests Yemenis have been completely isolated from the host society. The important contributions of this study were that it helped the research better understand the status of Yemeni students' negotiation of their similarities and differences with Malays. Another important finding was to understand that for some of the participants, the fusion of identity is not always accepted as they have tensions in trying to integrate their different aspects of identity.

This study also reveals three dominant types of identities among Yemenis, the first is clear identity where most participants clearly identify themselves as Yemenis or Muslims contradicting Jacobson (1997) that suggested allegiance to religion is more than any other form of social affiliation. Second, is ambivalent identity, for this group of participants, their identities were constantly varying between strong and weak poles. In a state of ambivalence, they had simultaneous, conflicting feelings towards their Yemeni or Muslim identity. Stated another way, their ambivalent identity meant they experienced having thoughts and/or emotions of both positive and negative valence towards their identity. This resonates with Khan and Uneke, (2000) that reveals there is apparent love-hate relationship among Muslim women in North America toward their religious identity these women respond ambivalently to the structured contradictions of Muslim female identity. Third, transit identity, where some participant considers Malaysia as temporary point, thus, distracting from more participation or social involvement with Malays. This agrees with LaCapra (2004) theory about transit identity which suggested that individuals regardless of their social or cultural background would be always in transit as long as they are not residing in their own country.

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